Rapa-Nui, or Easter Island, in November 1868

The following report is by R.S. (Richard Sainthill), an officer on the HMS *Topaze*. It appeared 130 years ago, in *Macmillan Magazine* (1870; Volume 21, No. 125: 449-454). This rather obscure report provides a fascinating look at the island as it was in times past.

IN OCTOBER 1868, the *Topaze* being about to sail for Easter Island, we made particular inquiries of every one at Callao who was at all likely to be able to give us any information respecting that lonely spot. Our success was small, and we could ascertain nothing except that some Jesuit missionaries had been landed there five years ago, and might now possibly, if alive, be anxious to leave the island, the character of the natives being excessively bad. The sailing directions told us it was 1,500 miles from any other inhabited land except Pitcairn's, and that the gigantic statues seen by Cook did not exist when Captain Beechey tried to land. Besides this, we had Cooks' "Voyages."

We sighted the island on 31st Oct., and on the following day, having steamed round its dark southern cliffs, came-to off the little beach where Cook had anchored in 1774. Above this beach, on some rising ground, there now appeared a low white-washed house with a steep roof; close to the sea were two other buildings, and the space between was occupied by about one hundred light-brown oval huts, each with a small square hole in front; behind this settlement (Hanga-roa) rose two or three old volcanoes with flattened summits, and some rounded hills; to the north and south the ground sloped up gradually almost into mountains, which to the south terminated in the dark cliffs round which we had steamed. Not a tree was to be seen, and except a few red patches on the hills, and a few spots green with sugar-cane or sweet potato, all was brown with tufted grass. On the lower part of the southern hill stood another house (Matavere), from which a whale-boat pulled out, and Monsieur Bornier, a Frenchman recently settled there, came on board. From him and from the missionaries who lived at Hanga-roa, we subsequently learned that the islanders had lived free from foreign interference until about 1859 or 1860, when six or seven ships from the "brutal" Republic of Peru made a descent, and carried off 1,200 or 1,500 people, of whom only three had ever returned. Of these pirates three fell into the hands of the islanders, and with such provocation it is not surprising, and is scarcely displeasing, to hear they were killed and eaten. In 1864 the feeling was so bitter against all foreigners that a French missionary who landed was only saved to become the slave of the principal chief; and the courage of Père Roussel, the present superior, who a year later dared to land, would be easier to admire than imitate. Set on shore from a little vessel, against the will of the natives, he walked alone toward the chief, who, at his approach, took up a stone, intending, he afterwards said, to kill and eat him; but the good Père had not come for such a purpose. Raising his staff, he struck the chief, who fortunately fell stunned, and the Père passed on through the midst of the crowd unharmed[1]. The result of such intrepid conduct is that of the 900 natives there is not one who is not a professed Christian. Captain Bornier took up his abode on the island as soon as order was established; and, during our short visit, both he and the missionaries most kindly aided us in our communications with the islanders, and gave us every information.

It being Sunday when we arrived, we did not land until after church service. A crowd of good-tempered men and boys welcomed us as we approached the rocks, and we had to shake hands till we were tired; the whole party then led us by a stony path to M. Bornier's house, and thence by a good road towards the settlement to visit the missionaries.

On the way our hosts surrounded us, offering for barter little wooden figures, and peculiar implements shaped like canoe paddles, but used only in their dances, and called "rapa". Occasionally they would burst into a loud chant, in time to which they kept up a jumping dance, their arms working about, and the "nua," a garment tied loosely across their shoulders, flying out from their naked bodies in the wind. The scene was sufficiently wild, and the eyes of some of them watched us with a droll expression, as if they thought they would rather surprise us.

The huts, shaped like an egg cut in two longways, were exactly as Cook described, except that the largest was not so much as thirty feet long; the thatch of reeds and cane was neatly laced on, and out of the doors, which were about two feet square, numerous bushy heads looked up at us and called out a welcome.

At the Mission House, which was built by Père Roussel, we were cordially received, and afterwards shown round the garden, which was planted with maize, beans, &c., and would have flourished better had it not been for the fierce trade-wind which swept down the hill, unchecked by a single bush; they then accompanied us to the low cliffs opposite the ship, to show us three statues (Moai), which appear to have been standing when Cook was there; we found them fallen face downwards, and broken in two, their huge red headdresses, "hau," rolled to a distance. Between the broken parts of one of the Moai some handsome ferns[3] were growing; I gathered the root, and, when we walked back to the boat, our native friends followed us with arms full of the plants.

Early next day we landed, and, guided by several boys, set out to visit the Moai at Quinipu[3] on the eastern shore. On the way our guides introduced us to an ugly lump of stone, about four feet high, almost featureless; they called him Moai Hava, and he is now a passenger on board the ship[4]. A short distance brought us to the eastern coast, and we were first led to a red pillar, at the foot of which were human bones, and under some matting a skeleton: facing the sea were two platforms; one, on which lay six broken Moai, was altogether in ruins, the monstrous red crown, five feet high by six feet in diameter, close by them. The second platform was perfect, and contained stones nine feet long and four feet wide; the Moai here were also fallen, and under their breasts was a vault, in which were human skulls and bones. The largest Moai was eighteen feet long without the crown.

It was still early, and having heard from Captain Bornier that the southern summit was a crater (Te-rano-kau) we mounted the hill and in less than an hour reached the ridge. The magnificent spectacle took us quite by surprise. The crater is 1,500 yards across the top, 1,200 yards at the bottom, and 400 to 500 feet deep, quite circular, the sides dark coloured, sprinkled with green plantains and cloth-tree bushes; the bottom flat and covered with reeds, except where the rain-water had collected into large ponds. Opposite to the place where we stood the wall of the crater was broken, and we could see the blue sunny ocean, with its white-topped waves dashing against the outlying rocks. The descent was very rough; the bottom a marsh, covered everywhere with ferns and moss, which, where it had been turned up, had dried into peat. Some of our party made their way to the ponds to bathe, and the rest waded across through the reeds to a winding path, which led by a garden belonging to Captain Bornier up the side of the crater. From the crater to the landing-place the way was easy, a good path leading by a gradual descent direct to the Captain's house, and to Hanga-roa.

In the course of our conversation with the missionaries and Captain Bornier we found that the statues were still to be seen erect in one part of the island. The distance seemed very uncertain, but we could not believe that any part of so small an island was more than four or five hours' walk, and the next morning we set out early to explore, having ascertained that the spot we were to visit was called Te-rano Otu-iti (Crater of the little hill), and that very large statues were standing both inside and outside the crater.

At the back of the settlement a pair of extinct volcanoes rise rather abruptly, and in the hollow between them some dark specks could be seen from the ship. The path led us to these specks, which proved to be a number of the red crowns of the Moai, which lay scattered about, as if they had been rolled down the hillside and left till wanted; the sizes were enormous, some of them nine feet in diameter and eight feet high, and all more of less marked by rude carvings of ships, birds, &c[5]. The quarry itself we found in a little crater up the side of the hill, with a deep gap in the place where these monstrous stones had been rolled out; in the bottom of the crater were other crowns: one immense one was oval, eleven feet by ten feet, and nine feet high. We could not find the bed of rock out of which they had been hewn, and concluded that the chippings of the ancient carvers had filled up the holes, decomposed, and formed the grass-grown soil on which we stood.

Beyond this spot the ground was strewn with sharp lava stones, and we were compelled to walk in the crooked narrow paths, across which the stones encroached so much that if we ceased for one moment to watch our steps, or looked round without halting, our toes or ankles suffered. I had remarked the natives walked with a knock-kneed gait; and with such paths we must soon have done likewise; it was fatiguing, and one of the guides, the proud possessor of a pair of trousers which did not fit, gave in.

Here and there we crossed hollows, in which plants of sugar-cane grew at intervals, and in places were a few sweet potato plants in patches, marked off with little heaps of stones, the top one usually white. But the soil in general produced only tufted grass, and was everywhere strewn with the sharp loose stones. The sun shone bright, and the warm trade-wind blew strongly by us, causing great thirst, which we could only alleviate by sucking sugar-cane, after the manner of our guides.

We passed numerous Moai, some of great size, all prostrate, and, all but one, on their faces; and at length came in sight of Otu-iti, in the interior of which, and at its foot, we could distinguish several Moai standing erect. The crater itself looked like a gigantic circular earthwork, except that for one-third of its circumference a wall of rock towered abruptly to a height of 200 or 300 feet. The rounded edges of the crater were dotted with little heaps at regular distances, and in spite of the rock, it looked so artificial that I quite expected to find a ditch as a part of the defences [sic] at the base. The ascent was very steep, and a large Moai lay in the path, which was worn into a deep hollow, as if here, too, large masses had been formerly hauled down; and the gap by which we entered the crater confirmed us in this idea.

From the ridge we looked into a basin, with a flat, reed-grown bottom, 200 or 300 yards in diameter, 100 feet below; a ring of green sugar-cane fringed the reeds; the walls of the crater, clothed in the dried grass, sloped regularly to the bottom. The regularity was broken by the rock opposite, which served as a background to a number of Moai, standing erect in an irregular line. One, facing us, gazed across, its compressed lips expressing surprise, or perhaps anger, at our intrusion.

But there was more to see, and we walked past the Moai and climbed the rock to look down on the plain outside, where the statues stood or lay in numbers. But our attention was soon entirely engrossed by those within the crater.

Close below us, lying on their backs, parallel, but with heads in opposite directions, were two Moai, one thirty feet long, nine feet wide, and fourteen feet from the crown of the head to the chin; the other, compared with his bulky neighbour, a pigmy, of seventeen feet. They had both apparently been carved out of one block of stone, and the smaller one had been shortened by several feet; the block divided from his bust still lay in its original position. Like all the statues, they consist of bust only; the arms are merely indicated along the sides, and in the ears, elongated by the insertion of an ornament in the lobes, are placed far too high to appear in their natural place.

Numbers of these gigantic statues lay scattered about, their colour the same as the rock, and their features so huge that they were not easily distinguished until we were close upon them. Our party dispersed along the quarry, each making his own discoveries, and on all sides there were constant cries of "Here is another! here is another!" Some were lying head down the slope, some feet down, some sideways; the longest which we measured was thirty-three feet, but the biggest was a monster fourteen feet wide, twenty-two long, and eight or nine feet thick. In a great many the eyes had not been carved but the shadow of the overhanging brow made this quite imperceptible at a distance; the noses were generally perfect, the mouth broad, the lips compressed, and it seemed to me the latter were always unnaturally close to the nostrils. At first I could see no likeness to the present race, but one of the guides sat down before me. His ears, as in all the young natives, lacked the slit in the lobe and the elon-

gating ornament, but his nose, low at the bridge, with broad fleshy nostrils, was exactly that of the Moai (the Moai's was seventy-five inches long and thirty-seven wide). While I was comparing them the guide called out "A-a" ("yes"), in answer to some question, and his upper lip curled as close to his nostrils as that of the Moai was carved. A remark which immediately followed appeared to displease him, when, drawing up the lower lip, he compressed it on the upper, in the way of the ancient model, but instead of its firm straight lines, the corners of his mouth dropped, with an expression of deep disgust.

There were no crowns in or near Otu-iti, and many of the Moai, which were erect, were too narrow from front to back ever to have supported such circular masses. These flatter statues generally stood erect, planted firmly in the earth; while the more bulky ones, which are prostrate all over the island, had merely been placed standing on the ground, or on a slab of stone. I judged the flatter ones the most ancient. In both kinds the crown of the head was cut flat; and the flatter kind, though unable to support the circular red crowns, may originally have been fitted with head-dresses of some perishable material. We afterwards found paintings of diadems with red ornaments, and all Polynesians appear to have valued that colour the most; while as to the shape, some black head-dresses, which we procured , were exactly similar to those of the statues.

We counted in the crater sixteen Moai erect, and thirty-two on their backs as the carvers had left them; some were quite finished, others but just commenced, and numerous blocks were merely marked by cuttings in the rock fourteen or fifteen inches wide, ready for the sculptors to commence their labours. Outside the crater the statues were at least as numerous and as interesting, but we had not time to inspect them minutely—the total number that we saw was about 150 (estimated by some at 200), including some on large platforms between Quinipu and Otu-iti[6] and the majority probably exceeded twenty feet in height. The missionaries possessed a stone chisel, which the islanders called a "tingi-tingi," and stated to be one of the implements with which the Moai were carved. The Moai and the little wooden images which they sold to us, all had individual names.

The legend is, that many years ago King Tukuihu set out from Rapa-iti (Little Rapa, where the New Zealand steamers now have a depôt) in a canoe, and at last arrived at Rapa-nui (Great Rapa, or Easter Island), where they settled, and carved the Moai in the crater, whence in the night they removed themselves to their present positions on the different points of the island. Tukuihu was also the first who carved the wooden images. When he became old he did not die, but changed into a butterfly; and children, chasing these insects, still call out, "Tukuihu!, Tukuihu!"

On the following day we again visited Te-rano-kau, to explore a number of stone-dwellings, said to have been built by King Tukuihi, on the ridge of the crater where the cliff overhangs the sea.

As we approached the cliff we observed a number of low mounds overgrown with ferns and grass, and hardly distinguishable from the hill itself. On closer inspection they appeared to resemble the oyster grottoes of the London boys, being built of dark flat stones and earth; each of them had two doors eighteen or twenty inches square; and in the ground, outside the doors, were holes, partly covered with stones, and long enough and large enough to hold the body of a man. Creeping on hands and knees, we entered one of the doors, and passing through the wall, six or seven feet thick, reached the interior in utter darkness, and found it the shape and size of a modern hut, thirty feet long, ten or twelve feet wide, and high enough in the middle to stand upright in. When our eyes became accustomed to the want of light, we found paintings in red and white, on flat slabs, fixed into the walls opposite the doors; on one slab the "rapa" was represented, the upper part marked with eyes, nose, and mouth. On the other was a full-rigged ship, the sailors dancing jigs (a rare accomplishment now) and from the main royal yard-arm one of them was waving a flag; the worsted work, in which sailors even in these time delight, often represents similar scenes.

Finding two or three of these huts exactly alike, I walked on to look at some rocks, on which faces, hands, oval, &c. were rudely scraped, and sat down in the sunshine and breeze. To the left lay the dark crater, with its flat reedy bottom; to the right, more than a thousand feet below me, the sea. The cliffs were perpendicular, and covered with ferns, among which little white specks of sea-birds flew in and out. The sea was deep blue, raised into a swell by the breeze, and the tops of the waves were mottled white with foam. The beach lay at my feet, but so far below that the noise of the surf could not be heard.

All at one someone shouted my name, and I was told there was something to see in one of the houses. Crawling into the dark hole, a gruff voice saluted me with some jargon, but I recognized the voice, and found the owner engaged in sketching carvings of bird and rapas on the back of the head of a Moai, which was buried to its shoulders in the ground opposite one of the doors. The face, as far as we could feel with our hands in the dark, seemed perfect. The remainder of the afternoon was occupied with our discovery, the sketch was duly exhibited on board, and the Moai, in consequence, on the following morning left the house in which he had so long dwelt, and two days after was floated off to the ship, amidst the cheers of the islanders. Though a dwarf—only eight feet long—his name is eight-syllabled—Hoa-haka-nana-ia, and the house was called Tau-ra-renga. He is well preserved; an exact model of the gigantic statues which we saw the day before, and we met with no other instance of carving on the back. His weight is said to be three tons.

The legend is that King Tukuihu dwelt in these houses in the month when the sea-birds nested, and excelled in searching for eggs in the face of the cliff. When he quitted the human shape and became a butterfly, the chiefs who were candidates for the office he had vacated assembled on the same spot, and he who first obtained an egg, or a certain number of eggs, became king. This mode of election was continued to a late date, the missionaries having known a son of Ro-to-Pito, the last king. The figures of birds on the back of the Moai may have some reference to this legend, and Tau-ra-renga may possibly have been the palace of Tukuihu and of his successors.

Like other Polynesians, the Easter Islanders are fast dying out. In appearance they are regular Kanakas, but a young Tahitian in the service of Captain Bornier was a fine-looking fellow

compared with them. As to their character, we found them *perfectly* honest, though they are very fond of bartering, and all our old clothes went to them in exchange for wooden images, rapas, &c.; and small black lines made of women's hair came on board in such quantities that all our crew have since been occupied in the manufacture of watch-guards and bracelets, as memorials of our visit.

Captain Cook supposed they drank salt water, as he could find no fresh water on the island; and though the craters contain an abundant supply, our guides drank little contenting themselves with the juice of the sugar-cane and raw sweet potato. Captain Bornier said they eat their only meal of cooked potato in the evening, and with this they still drink salt water at times.

The missionaries told us that since our visit they had introduced a new word, "man-war," to express anything great and wonderful; and their feelings towards us were so friendly that on the day we sailed, a number entreated to be allowed to go with us. When the last boat shoved off, it was hardly possible to get them to leave here, and their manners were so engaging we did not leave them without regret.

Immediately after Hoa-haka-nana-ia had been hoisted on board, we made sail and left the island.

R. S. Valparaíso, 3 Dec. 1868

FOOTNOTES

[1] Father Roussel carried a cane with a leaded head. No wonder the chief was stunned by its blow.

[2] *Asplenium obtusatum* of Forster, and *Polypoidium Billardière* of R. Brown

[3] Vinapu; the red "pillar" is the female statue at Vinapu 2, where it is said corpses were exposed prior to the burial of the bones.

[4] Moai Hava is now in the British Museum.

[5] This is the quarry site at Puna Pau.

[6] The count of statues at Rano Raraku is closer to 395. The exact total for all the island is still an 'unknown' but likely it is close to 1000. Many statues are still hidden in *ahu* rubble, or beneath the mounds of overburden at the quarry.